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An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Post-Secondary Students' Emotional Responses and Coping Strategies Following Examination Failure of Advanced Level Biology

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotional responses and coping strategies of post-secondary students following their failure in the Advanced Level Biology MATSEC examination, using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework. The study sought to answer three main research questions: (1) What emotional responses do students experience upon failing an important examination? (2) What coping strategies do they adopt to manage these emotions? (3) What forms of support do they consider helpful in preparing for resit exams? Ten Maltese students, aged 17-18, participated in this study, and their experiences were analysed through semi-structured interviews, focus group, and classroom observations. Findings revealed a wide range of emotional responses, with most students experiencing intense feelings of depression, anxiety, and low self-worth, while others exhibited more moderate reactions. The study further found that coping strategies varied significantly. While some students engaged in introspective evaluation and shifted their mindset toward self-improvement, others resorted to avoidance behaviours. Support from family, peers, and teachers emerged as critical, with personalised one-on-one feedback from teachers being highly valued by students. The research, which was guided by Weiner's Attribution Theory, concludes with recommendations for educational leaders and educators to prioritise individualised academic support and continuous professional development for teachers, especially in psychological awareness. Limitations of the study include the short timeframe and the potential for response bias, as the researcher also served as the students' teacher during the remedial course.

Keywords: introspective evaluation, support networks, mindset shift, avoidance behaviour, psychology

1. Introduction

Examination failure in post-secondary education, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as Advanced-level exams, can profoundly affect a student's mental health and academic trajectory (Patel et al., 2015). Failing a single A-level exam can jeopardise a student's chances of enrolling in their desired university programme, thereby influencing their future opportunities. This research aims to examine the experiences of students who fail a MATSEC Matriculation exam, focusing on their emotional responses and the coping strategies they develop during the six weeks period between their initial failure and the resit examination. The MATSEC Matriculation system in Malta encompasses both Advanced-level (A-level) and Intermediate-level (I-level) exams, categorised at Malta Qualification Framework Level 4 (MQF 4), which is also equivalent to European Qualification Framework Level 4 (EQF 4) (MEDE, 2017). By employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study delves into the subjective experiences of these students, seeking to reveal insights into how they manage this critical juncture in their academic lives. The researcher, who provides remedial classes for students who have failed A-level Biology, invited her students to participate in this study to explore their emotional responses to failure, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the types of support they perceive as beneficial. Recognising a potential bias, the researcher explicitly states that data will be collected exclusively from A-level Biology students seeking remedial lessons.

1.1 Background to the Study

Resit examinations provide students with a second opportunity to achieve a passing grade after initially failing an exam. During the period between release of results of the first attempt and the resit, many educators offer remedial classes to help students revise the curriculum. Patel et al. (2015) highlight that such remedial classes play a critical role in supporting students.

Remedial classes typically focus on reinforcing key curriculum concepts and addressing gaps in students' knowledge. The goal is to better prepare students for their resit examination. However, Patel et al. (2015) argue that simply preparing for the resit is insufficient if the deeper reasons for failure are not addressed. They advocate for a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to failure, which may include challenges related to learning skills, organisation, and personal issues. Identifying these underlying causes allows educators to provide tailored support, which may include improving study techniques, enhancing time management skills, and addressing personal or health-related obstacles that influence academic performance. Hays (2012) supports this approach, arguing that personalised interventions based on a detailed understanding of students' unique challenges are more effective than one-size-fits-all strategies. Patel et al. (2015) caution against categorising failing students without considering the complexity of their individual circumstances, advocating for a more nuanced approach to intervention.

In small remedial classes, like those typically offered by Maltese teachers during summer holidays, this personalised approach is feasible. The Ministry for Education, Youth, and Research (MEYR, 2023b) emphasises the importance of teacher training in providing targeted support beyond simply covering the curriculum content. By combining this targeted support with a deep understanding of students' needs, educators can empower failing students to overcome obstacles and achieve academic success (MEYR, 2023b).

Examination failure can also have serious emotional consequences, often contributing to increased anxiety and emotional distress (Salimzadeh et al., 2021). International bodies like UNESCO and the OECD have recognised the importance of addressing student wellbeing, particularly in the context of academic setbacks (Mason, 2017). There is growing

support for developing targeted interventions to help students manage the emotional challenges associated with failure (Cefai et al., 2022).

Furthermore, students who fail important examinations may drop out of the education system. At a European level, the European Union has launched initiatives to investigate the causes and effects of early school leaving among students aged 18-24 (Eurostat, 2024). These initiatives encourage member states to reduce dropout rates by providing better guidance and support to students. Malta, for example, receives EU funding for programmes like Youth Guarantee, which funds summer remedial classes for students preparing for resit examinations (Escudero & López, 2017). Malta's policy on early school leaving includes providing personalised support, mentoring, and alternative study options, such as vocational training, to help struggling students (MEYR, 2023a). By 2022, Malta's early leaving from education and training (ELET) rate had dropped to 10.1%, a significant improvement from 33% in 2005. The goal is to reduce this rate further, to below 9% by 2030 (MEYR, 2023a).

Despite these efforts, local research on student wellbeing at the post-secondary level remains limited, particularly concerning the experiences of post-secondary students who fail critical exams. Failing a high-stakes examination, such as the MATSEC A-level, can have a profound psychological impact, triggering emotions such as anxiety, depression, and anger (Bueno, 2021; Maymon & Hall, 2021). Researchers have documented a wide range of emotional responses to failure, including sadness, disappointment, and frustration (Catterall, 1989; Cleary et al., 2008; Cornell et al., 2006; Greasley & Ashworth, 2007; Holme et al., 2010; Jurges et al., 2009; Kruger et al., 2016; Papay et al., 2010; Patel et al., 2015; Reardon et al., 2010). Kruger et al. (2016) emphasise the importance of understanding the impact of failure on students who rely on education to improve their future prospects.

This study aims to fill the research gap by focusing on post-secondary students' emotional responses, coping strategies, and the support they find helpful after failing an A-level MATSEC examination in Biology. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this research will explore students' personal experiences during the period between the initial failure during the second week of July, and the resit exam, starting during the last week of August, making it the first of its kind in the local context. This study will offer insights into how students cope with the emotional and academic challenges of examination failure and provide a foundation for developing more effective support strategies.

1.2 Theoretical Framework Underpinning this Study

Attribution theory (Weiner, 1986; Weiner, 2018) has been selected to guide this study, as it aligns well with the research questions. The theory examines how individuals perceive the causes of their successes and failures, and how these perceptions influence their future behaviour and motivation. It focuses on three main components: locus of control (whether the cause is internal or external), stability (whether the cause is consistent or variable), and controllability (whether individuals believe they can control the outcome). For example, a student may attribute exam failure to internal factors, such as a perceived lack of intelligence, or to external factors, like bad luck or the difficulty of the exam. These causes can be seen as stable (unchanging, such as intelligence) or unstable (temporary, like illness), and as controllable or uncontrollable, depending on the student’s belief in their ability to influence the outcome (Weiner, 2018).

In this study, attribution theory will serve as the theoretical framework for exploring how students perceive the causes of their exam failure, and how these attributions influence their coping strategies and the types of support they find effective. The theory will help to understand the attributional consequences of failure and will inform the analysis of students' experiences.

2. Literature Review

Examination failure is often associated with negative emotional responses such as despair and anger, which can impact students' motivation and self-concept (Jurges et al., 2009; Wuthrich et al., 2020). Recent studies indicate that failure can lead to decreased self-efficacy and psychological distress, adversely affecting students' future academic success and emotional wellbeing (Wuthrich et al., 2021). In a longitudinal study, Wuthrich et al. (2021) tracked stress, depression, and anxiety across the final year of secondary school, providing insights into the psychological impact of academic failure and the need for effective coping mechanisms.

Coping strategies adopted by students post-failure vary significantly. Research suggests that students who attribute failure to internal factors, such as effort and study skills, are more likely to adopt positive coping mechanisms (Cleary et al., 2008; Duru et al., 2024; Greasley & Ashworth, 2007). In contrast, students with a fixed mindset may resort to avoidance behaviours or self-handicapping, exacerbating their academic struggles (Duru et al., 2024; Holland, 2016). Duru et al. (2024) explored fear of failure and academic satisfaction, highlighting the role of emotion regulation in helping students cope with academic setbacks.

Encouraging a growth mindset and strategic attributions can empower students to navigate academic setbacks more effectively. Yeager and Dweck (2020) emphasise that educators who promote a growth mindset can help students build resilience and adaptability, which is essential for coping with failure. According to Weiner's attribution theory, students who believe their failure is due to unstable and controllable factors, such as effort, are more likely to persist and eventually improve their performance (Weiner, 1985, 2018). Conversely, those who perceive their failure as a result of fixed traits, such as intelligence, may experience heightened anxiety and a sense of helplessness (Putwain et al., 2023).

Furthermore, research highlights the importance of various forms of support in aiding students' recovery from failure. These include instructional support through tutoring and study strategies, emotional support from peers and family, and encouragement (Kruger et al., 2016; Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Recent findings indicate that structured remedial programmes aimed at reducing early school leaving rates and enhancing student wellbeing have been implemented in Maltese educational policies (MEYR, 2023a). Tailored support that addresses hidden challenges, such as anxiety or a lack of study skills, has been shown to be particularly effective (Holland, 2016; Putwain et al., 2023).

Interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and stress-reduction programmes have proven beneficial in reducing distress and improving performance among failing students (Yusufov et al., 2019). In a meta-analysis, Yusufov et al. (2019) evaluated stress reduction interventions for undergraduate and graduate students, providing valuable insights into effective strategies for managing academic stress. Additionally, Belcher et al. (2022) explored the association between teachers' use of fear appeals and the mental health outcomes of students, highlighting the importance of fostering a supportive learning environment to mitigate performance pressure.

Addressing students' emotional wellbeing alongside academic instruction leads to better academic resilience and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wuthrich et al., 2021). Psychological training for educators, integrated into professional development programmes, has been recommended as a strategy to enhance teachers' ability to support struggling students (Haber, 2020).

3. Methodology

Qualitative research is central to the study, using interviews, focus group, and observations to gather rich, descriptive data that reflect how students interpret their experiences of examination failure (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). The philosophical stance outlines the interpretivist approach used in this study, which considers reality to be subjective and knowledge socially constructed (Saunders et al., 2012). The ontology and epistemology of interpretivism guided the study's focus on understanding students' experiences through their own interpretations of examination failure (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). An inductive approach was employed, allowing broader principles to emerge from specific data (Saunders et al., 2012).

Phenomenology draws from Husserl's approach to understanding unique experiences, focusing on how students subjectively perceive their failure (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It delves into participants' mindsets and experiences, allowing the researcher to immerse themselves in participants' perspectives to gain deep insights (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The strengths of IPA include its detailed, idiographic focus on individual experiences and its capacity to provide in-depth analysis of how students perceive examination failure (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Tuffour, 2017). However, its limitations include a lack of standardisation and challenges in capturing the essence of experiences, along with issues related to the researcher's and participants' communication skills (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Tuffour, 2017).

The research tools used in the study include semi-structured interviews right after the participants received their examination result and other interviews at the end of the remedial course, unstructured observations all throughout the six weeks course, and a focus group mid-course. These tools were chosen to gather in-depth data on students' emotional reactions and coping strategies after failing an exam. Semi-structured interviews provided a flexible framework to explore participants' experiences, allowing them to freely express their thoughts while guiding the conversation (Cohen et al., 2017). Focus group discussions facilitated interaction between participants, enriching the data by allowing students to exchange ideas and reflect on their shared experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Unstructured observations enabled the researcher to observe changes in students' behaviour and emotions in a natural classroom setting, focusing on their preparations for the resit exam (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

The study used purposive sampling to recruit a small, homogenous group of students who had failed an important MATSEC examination and sought remedial lessons (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

3.1 Data Analysis

The analysis stage followed a rigorous qualitative approach to ensure credibility, reliability, and depth of interpretation, in line with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The process was systematic and iterative, involving several key techniques to identify, refine, and interpret emergent themes from participant narratives. This approach was particularly suited for capturing individual lived experiences while recognising commonalities across participants (Smith et al., 2009).

Thematic analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, adapted for IPA, which emphasises the importance of reflexivity in data interpretation. The first step involved familiarisation with the data, where the researcher transcribed and repeatedly read through the interview transcripts. Reflexive engagement with the data allowed for an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives. Initial impressions were

noted to ensure an inductive, data-driven approach to theme identification, in line with recommendations from Creswell and Poth (2018).

Following this, key phrases and meaningful units of data were systematically coded line by line. These descriptive codes captured students' emotional reactions, coping mechanisms, and reflections on failure, forming the foundation for later thematic clustering (Saunders et al., 2012). Codes were then analysed for patterns, similarities, and contrasts across participants' responses. Related concepts were clustered into preliminary themes, ensuring that each theme reflected participants' subjective experiences while maintaining phenomenological depth (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

The themes underwent iterative refinement to ensure they captured the core essence of participants' narratives while remaining distinct and non-overlapping (Creswell, 2014). Relationships between themes were examined in relation to theoretical frameworks such as Weiner's (1985) attribution theory and Beck's (2021) cognitive behavioural theory, strengthening the interpretative depth of the findings.

To enhance trustworthiness, the refined themes were subjected to peer review and inter-coder reliability checks. A second researcher independently coded sections of data and compared interpretations to ensure consistency. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, reinforcing the credibility of the findings (Miles et al., 2014). Once the themes were finalised, they were defined, named, and integrated into the research discussion. Verbatim quotes were included to illustrate the findings, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in participants' authentic voices, as recommended by Smith et al. (2009).

Multiple strategies were employed to ensure rigour and credibility. Inter-coder reliability checks involved a second researcher coding a subset of transcripts, with results compared to assess consistency (Saunders et al., 2012). Member-checking was used to validate the accuracy of interpretations by sharing summaries of responses with participants, ensuring that participants recognised their experiences in the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Time triangulation was incorporated by collecting data over two months, allowing for longitudinal analysis of students' emotional responses and coping mechanisms. This method ensured that findings were not influenced by temporary emotional states, providing a more comprehensive understanding of students' evolving psychological responses (Balmer et al., 2021).

Reflexivity played an important role in maintaining transparency throughout the study. The researcher kept a reflexive journal to document biases, assumptions, and evolving interpretations, ensuring that preconceived notions did not influence data analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymising participant identities and securely storing sensitive data in compliance with GDPR regulations (Legislation Malta, 2018). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made aware of the purpose, risks, and voluntary nature of their involvement (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Emotional safeguarding measures were in place to mitigate distress, particularly given the sensitive nature of examination failure and its impact on mental health. Participants were provided with access to counselling referrals if needed, ensuring their wellbeing remained a priority (Creswell, 2014).

The study employed a rigorous IPA-informed thematic analysis, ensuring methodological robustness and interpretative depth. The combination of systematic coding, inter-coder reliability, member-checking, and time triangulation strengthened the trustworthiness and credibility of findings (Creswell, 2014). By maintaining ethical integrity and reflexivity, the research provides a valid, nuanced understanding of students' lived

experiences, contributing valuable insights to educational psychology and student wellbeing research.

4. Findings and Discussion

The study included ten participants, consisting of seven females and three males, from various regions of Malta and from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The majority were 18 years old, with two aged 17. All participants were Maltese and had failed the MATSEC Advanced Level Biology examination, receiving an "F" grade. They attended different state and church-affiliated post-secondary schools in Malta, with none coming from private schools.

4.1 Emotional Reactions Post-Failure

The study revealed various psychological reactions to exam failure, aligned with *cognitive processes* as described by Putwain et al. (2022) and Weiner (2018). Students responded differently, with some experiencing intense emotions, while others exhibited more moderate reactions.

4.1.1 Intense Emotional Reactions

Seven out of ten students reported experiencing intense emotional responses after their examination failure. They described their experiences as profoundly distressing and deeply personal. Many expressed feelings of self-punishment, isolation, and depression, with one student describing the experience as "falling into a deep dark well." They conveyed overwhelming emotions of self-hatred, self-blame, and shame, compounded by a sense of "crushing defeat" and "high disappointment." Some likened the experience to a "punch in the stomach," while others felt that "part of me died." Coping mechanisms included "crying," "screaming into a pillow," and "stress eating," while others reported a "loss of interest in activities" and an overwhelming sense of "hopelessness." The participants' vivid descriptions underscore the emotional toll of such failure, with one calling it "an overwhelming experience." These findings are consistent with studies by Jurges et al. (2009), which reported high levels of despair and anxiety among students in Germany who failed central exit exams, and Cornell et al. (2006), who found that 80% of high school students in North Carolina who failed exams experienced depression.

These descriptions resonate with the biological explanation of depression, where prolonged sadness and loss of interest can impair memory and concentration (Thapar et al., 2022). This is further explained by the overactivation of the amygdala and hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal axis, which releases stress hormones like cortisol, shrinking brain regions responsible for learning and memory (Leistner & Menke, 2020). The impact of anxiety on students' ability to study effectively was highlighted, with students reporting physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, and insomnia, linked to heightened anxiety (Thapar et al., 2022).

The emotional toll of failure stemmed from multiple sources: fear of disappointing parents and teachers, losing university entry opportunities, and missing out on summer enjoyment while peers celebrated. One notable aspect unique to Maltese culture was students' fear of disappointing their grandparents, with one participant describing how her grandparents prayed and lit candles for her success.

Weiner's (1985, 2018) Attribution Theory explains how students who attribute failure to internal factors, such as lack of effort, experience negative emotions, further suppressing their potential. These feelings of hopelessness, shame, and self-blame led to unhealthy

behaviours like isolation, self-punishment, and stress-eating (Thapar et al., 2022). This aligns with Beck's cognitive-behaviour theory (2021), which suggests that negative thoughts trigger depressive emotions and manifest in self-destructive behaviours. These findings support previous research showing that internal attributions of failure can result in diminished self-esteem and reduced motivation (Jurges et al., 2009; Wuthrich, 2021).

Some students also described feelings of confusion or "turmoil," which may reflect difficulty with emotional regulation (Thapar et al., 2022). Student 1 described their experience with these words: "Receiving the results felt like a crushing defeat. In that moment, it seemed as though the world had come to an end. My emotions were in turmoil—I felt shocked and deeply disappointed in myself." One student experienced a delayed emotional reaction, reflecting slower cognitive appraisal, where individuals evaluate their situation and assess their ability to cope before reacting emotionally (Agah et al., 2021; Weiner, 1985).

4.1.2 Moderate Psychological Reactions

Three students reported moderate reactions to failure, exhibiting a carefree attitude and not experiencing depression or anxiety. These students attributed their failure to not studying enough and showed a realistic self-assessment, which mitigated negative emotions (Weiner, 1985). Student 7 admitted:

> "In the past, I tended to concentrate on topics I grasped easily, while ignoring sections that posed challenges. Nowadays, I recognize that I could have been more attentive during lessons. Despite being easily distracted by even the simplest noises due to my condition, I acknowledge that I could have put in more effort to focus and pay attention, and study more the topics I found challenging" (Student 7).

Another student exhibited cognitive dissonance, acknowledging his failure to submit coursework while still desiring to pass the exam. This dissonance may have moderated his emotional response (Weiner, 2001).

These students appreciated their teacher's encouragement, demonstrating adaptive coping strategies and autonomic nervous system regulation, which helped them remain calm in the face of stress (Bueno, 2021). The student with autism showed increased engagement through social support from a peer, further reducing stress (Agah et al., 2021).

4.2 Second Theme: Introspective Evaluation

This study revealed that students introspectively evaluated their examination failures to identify contributing factors, with most adopting a mindset shift, while others exhibited avoidance behaviours.

4.2.1 Mindset Shifts

Many students adopted a mindset shift after introspective evaluation, identifying areas of improvement such as time management and study techniques. They adjusted their approach by practicing active recall, spaced repetition, and working through past papers. This cognitive process of attributing failure to controllable factors like effort aligns with Weiner's (1985) theory and studies by Cleary et al. (2008) and Readron et al. (2010), which found that strategic attributions lead to improved performance in future exams.

Students also recognised the need to let go of negative emotions and focus on future success, which is consistent with findings by Cornell et al. (2006) that positive self-perceptions and goal-setting can enhance motivation. "By feeling bad, I am not going to

change the result. So, I tried to do like our teacher told us: leave the past in the past and steer the future" (Student 6). Most students acknowledged wasting time and aimed to improve their study habits, reflecting the role of internal attributions in shaping students' responses to failure (Kruger et al., 2016).

> "Positive psychology plays a significant role in maintaining a positive outlook. Rather than focusing on the glass as half empty, it encourages us to see how we can fill the empty half. Moreover, recognising that many successful individuals have faced exam failures but still achieved high-ranking positions provides encouragement. In essence, these setbacks serve as valuable lessons, motivating us to work hard and pursue our dreams" (Student 3).

4.2.2 Avoidance Behaviour

A few students exhibited avoidance behaviour, a common response to failure (Putwain et al., 2023) which could be linked to attempts to escape distress or cognitive interference caused by anxiety (Belcher et al., 2022; Thapar et al., 2022). For example, the researcher observed that student 1 presented a lot of worked past papers to be corrected and every time she got a D or a C, she used to become very angry and show frustration. After the third week, when she participated in the focus group, she stopped attending physically for the lessons and started attending online. She refused the teacher providing oral feedback about her work. She apologised and explained that she cannot take this stress any longer. It was very evident that her stress levels were very high, and she was not ready to accept any form of encouragement or moral support.

Students who showed avoidance behaviour, either avoided attending lessons in person, or distracted themselves with mobile phones during class, and missed homework deadlines, which can be linked to self-handicapping behaviours to protect self-esteem (Duru et al., 2024). Some students also engaged in escapism, such as watching television, to cope with stress. Student 6 confessed "when I saw all the material, panic set in, and I didn't know where to begin. So I watched some videos".

4.3 Third Theme: Support Networks

4.3.1 The Role of Family

Family support was crucial in helping students cope with the emotional impact of failure. Student 4 admitted that "knowing that your family cares about you no matter what, that is the best help." Parents, siblings, and grandparents provided emotional comfort, encouragement, and practical advice, helping students regain their confidence and focus on preparing for the resit. Emotional support, especially from family members who listened without judgment, was pivotal in shifting students' focus from failure to future success. This aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2020) findings on the role of family in emotional wellbeing and Wuthrich et al.'s (2021) emphasis on maintaining a positive outlook through family support.

The study also highlighted the unique influence of Maltese religious culture, with grandparents offering prayers and lighting candles for their grandchildren's success. This form of emotional support is deeply rooted in Maltese family dynamics and was particularly significant for some students.

> "My grandparents have been praying for me and lighting candles in front of the statue of Our Holy Lady for months. They always ask how I'm doing in my studies and are so eager to hear that I've passed, so they can thank Our Holy Lady

for her grace. I can't stop picturing their happy faces turning to sadness. It's a feeling that hits me like a hole in my stomach" (Student 10).

4.3.2 Support from Peers

Peer support played a vital role in helping students cope with examination failure. Friends shared similar experiences, offering empathy, encouragement, and practical study tips. This sense of shared struggle reduced feelings of isolation and motivated students to persevere. The study found that students supported each other during remedial classes, fostering a sense of community and shared goals. This aligns with Sein et al.'s (2020) findings that peer support can mitigate negative emotions and improve academic outcomes.

4.3.3 Support from Teachers

The teacher's role was also critical, providing both academic and emotional support. The remedial teacher used a holistic approach, focusing on students' emotional wellbeing while helping them improve their study skills and subject understanding. One-to-one sessions allowed shy students to express themselves and receive personalised feedback, which helped boost their confidence. This approach aligns with research by Holland (2016), who emphasises the importance of addressing students' emotional and academic needs together. Student 7 expressed: "Some time ago I went abroad on an Erasmus and we had sessions about time management, how to deal with workloads and deadlines, study stills and so forth. I think that a student should not go for an Erasmus to have these sessions. I believe that all students should be taught these things."

Students valued the tailored study plans, revision techniques, and encouragement they received from the teacher of the remedial classes. They highlighted that the focus on time management and effective study methods was particularly beneficial. Additionally, they noted that these strategies, combined with the teacher's positive psychology approach, motivated them to remain engaged and strive for success. Furthermore, they appreciated the teacher's emphasis on fostering a growth mindset, which encouraged them to view failure as an opportunity for learning. This observation aligns with Yeager and Dweck's (2020) findings on the importance of a growth mindset in promoting resilience and adaptability within academic contexts. However, one student reported experiencing heightened anxiety when the importance of passing was overly emphasised, supporting Putwain et al.'s (2022) findings that performance pressure can exacerbate anxiety and impede academic performance.

4.4 Broader Impact of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational practice, mental health support, and policy development in post-secondary education, particularly in the Maltese context. The emotional and psychological toll of examination failure highlights the need for a more holistic approach to student wellbeing, incorporating emotional resilience training, targeted interventions, and structural changes within the educational system.

4.4.1 Implications for Educational Institutions

The study underscores the necessity of integrating emotional support mechanisms within post-secondary institutions to mitigate the psychological impact of failure. The intense emotional responses reported by students, including feelings of self-hatred, despair, and social withdrawal, indicate the need for structured mental health interventions, such as

school-based counselling services and stress management workshops. Educational institutions should adopt a wellbeing-centred approach by embedding psychoeducational programmes that equip students with coping strategies for academic setbacks.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of pedagogical reform in addressing exam-related stress. Many participants attributed their failure to ineffective study techniques, lack of structured revision plans, and poor time management. This aligns with research by Cleary et al. (2008) and Readron et al. (2010), which found that students who receive explicit training in self-regulated learning strategies perform better in subsequent assessments. Institutions should therefore incorporate study skills training and metacognitive coaching into their curriculum to enhance students' ability to manage academic challenges proactively.

Additionally, teacher professional development should include training on growth mindset strategies to help educators foster resilience in students. Yeager and Dweck (2020) emphasise that educators who encourage students to view failure as a learning opportunity promote academic perseverance and long-term motivation. In this study, students who engaged in positive reframing and introspective evaluation exhibited more adaptive coping mechanisms, suggesting that embedding mindset interventions within the educational framework could improve students' overall academic resilience.

4.4.2 Implications for Mental Health and Student Wellbeing

The findings reveal an urgent need for greater access to psychological support for students facing examination failure. The prevalence of depressive symptoms, self-punishment, and heightened anxiety among participants suggests that failure-related distress is not merely an academic issue but a mental health concern requiring early intervention. Research by Thapar et al. (2022) highlights the neurobiological impact of chronic stress and anxiety, including cognitive impairments that further hinder students' ability to recover academically.

Educational institutions should therefore adopt proactive mental health initiatives, such as peer support networks, mindfulness training, and stress reduction programmes. The success of students who maintained social support networks, particularly those who benefited from peer encouragement, reinforces the importance of fostering a community-based approach to student wellbeing. Studies by Ryan and Deci (2020) indicate that students who feel a sense of belonging and emotional validation from their peers are more likely to persist in their academic endeavours despite setbacks.

Furthermore, given the cultural significance of family support in Malta, as evidenced by students' fears of disappointing their grandparents, it is crucial to involve family members in student support initiatives. Parent-teacher collaboration, family education sessions on exam-related stress, and open discussions about academic challenges could help reduce the stigma of failure and promote healthier coping mechanisms.

4.4.3 Policy Considerations for Post-Secondary Education

At a policy level, these findings highlight the need for systemic reforms in the way educational institutions approach assessment, student support, and academic failure recovery programmes. The current examination system places significant performance pressure on students, often resulting in maladaptive coping mechanisms, including avoidance behaviours and self-handicapping. This supports Putwain et al.'s (2022) argument that excessive academic pressure can have unintended psychological consequences, ultimately affecting students' long-term academic engagement and mental health.

Educational policymakers should consider alternative assessment models, such as modular examination structures, coursework-based assessments, and continuous feedback mechanisms, to reduce the all-or-nothing stakes of final exams. Research by Wuthrich et al.

(2021) suggests that students who receive formative assessment opportunities tend to develop stronger self-efficacy and are less likely to experience extreme emotional distress following failure.

Moreover, re-sit policies should be designed to offer more than just a second chance at passing an exam. Students would benefit from structured remediation programmes, combining academic skill-building with emotional resilience training. The effectiveness of remedial teachers providing personalised study plans and one-to-one support, as reported by participants in this study, suggests that expanding such initiatives at a systemic level could improve student outcomes and reduce dropout rates in post-secondary education.

4.4.4 Contribution to Educational Psychology and Future Research

This study contributes to educational psychology literature by providing qualitative insights into how students emotionally process failure, particularly within a Maltese cultural context. The findings align with Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1985, 2018), which explains how students' perceptions of failure influence their emotional responses and future motivation. Furthermore, the study supports Cognitive Behavioural Theory (Beck, 2021) by demonstrating how negative thought patterns reinforce emotional distress and maladaptive coping strategies.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it has limitations. The short timeframe of three months restricted the depth of analysis. A longer study would allow for a more detailed exploration of the emotional and academic impacts of failure. Another significant limitation is the dual role of the researcher as both the teacher and investigator, which may have led to response bias, as students might have provided feedback they believed would please the researcher.

5. 2 Recommendations

5.2.1 Personalised One-on-One Support

The study emphasises the importance of personalised, one-on-one support from educators, particularly for students who experience intense psychological reactions to failure. Participants highlighted the value of receiving individualised attention and feedback, which helped them regain confidence and address specific weaknesses. However, providing such support requires time and effort beyond the standard teaching workload. Educational leaders may consider integrating one-on-one support into the curriculum planning process, ensuring that teachers are given the resources and time to provide personalised feedback as part of their regular duties.

5.2.2 Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Another recommendation is the need for continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers, focusing on identifying and addressing students' psychological and academic needs. CPD programmes should prioritise psychological awareness and support strategies, equipping teachers with the tools to help students manage stress, build resilience, and cope with failure. CPD should be integrated into the academic year to ensure teachers can develop

these skills without overloading their existing workload. This is especially important for preventing school dropouts, as students who receive inadequate emotional support are at a higher risk of disengaging from education (Eurostat, 2024).

5.2.3 Psychological Resilience and Student Retention

Schools should adopt a more holistic approach to education, combining emotional support with academic instruction to build psychological resilience in students. This is crucial for preventing dropouts following academic failure. Teachers who are trained to recognise signs of emotional distress and provide targeted support can help students develop healthier coping strategies, increasing their chances of academic success. Such support will not only improve students' wellbeing but also help them remain engaged in their education, reducing the risk of dropout and ensuring they are equipped to face future challenges.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Studies

Further research should explore the emotional responses, coping strategies, and support systems in students from diverse academic disciplines. This study focused on A-level Biology students, but different subjects may present unique challenges. Future research should also examine students who may not have access to formal remedial courses, particularly those from lower-income backgrounds, to understand how limited resources affect their coping mechanisms and support networks. Additionally, employing a more neutral party for data collection would mitigate the potential influence of teacher-student dynamics on the research findings.

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